

# *A Journey To Life*

*Bible Reading:*  
*Matthew 2: 1-12*

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On this Epiphany morning we have had the great privilege of welcoming two little children into the life of God's people. As you may have read in the bulletin, Epiphany is the time in the Christian calendar when believers remember Christ revealed to the world -

and revealed first to a group of gentiles, non-believers, who were called to greet the new child; the Magi - or as they're commonly called the Three Wise Men.

I'm not sure if you've seen the seasonal email joke making its way round in-bin's across the city. It asks:  
Do you know what would have happened if it had been Three Wise Women instead of Three Wise Men?

1. They would have asked directions
2. Arrived on time for the birth
3. Helped deliver the baby
4. Cleaned the stable
5. Made a casserole, and...
6. Brought practical gifts.

At least, that's the rumor.

What's the truth of the matter?

Let's hear the account of Scripture -

#### **MATTHEW 2: 1-12**

What do we really know about the wise men? Not much when you examine the scripture. They came from somewhere "east." That's all it says. Nothing about only three of them. Nothing about them being kings of orient.

Extrabiblical records indicate that the Magi were most likely hooked into the Zoroastrian religion, and were the ones who maintained the sacred fires, offered the sacrifices, read the stars and dispensed the prophecies to the leaders and the faithful among the people.

They were idolators, astrologers, and magicians. If you've studied the bible at all on these topics you'll know that they are all roundly condemned. The prophets spoke against them. Jews despised them. In the New Testament, the two references to magi - or magos in the singular - are uncomplimentary; Simon the Magician and Bar-Jesus are condemned as stumbling blocks to the gospel's spread (Acts 8 & 13).

They were not the sort you'd quickly invite to a holy occasion.

In fact, from the viewpoint of God's people in that day, these folk were the dregs of un-wisdom, tricksters and deceivers.

Yet there they are - front and centre at the birth of the Saviour.

History records that Israelites had been settled in the Persia area around 730 BC, and Hebrew thought had spread in the area. It would be fairly safe to assume, then, that astrologers knew then of Balaam's prophecy, recorded in Numbers 24:

*I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near.*

*A star will come out of Jacob; A scepter will rise out of Israel.*

Especially when you take this together with clues from a couple of ancient tracts which indicate that the Jews expected a star to indicate the birth of Messiah.

So, there were hints.

The pump, so to speak, had been primed.

And when the star appeared, the magi responded - intentionally, deliberately:

traveled hundreds of miles to follow the star in search of the King. There were no air conditioned cars with CD players for them, no hotels and no Burger Kings to drive through to grab lunch.

It was a difficult trip through difficult land.

But they did it!  
The bible leaves out lots of details about these mysterious people.  
But one thing it **does** tell -  
    right up front.....  
        *"Where is he?  
        We have come to worship him."*

And **THAT** friends, is what makes them wise.  
    Wise men who seek Christ.  
    Wise me who worship Him.

They had to leave behind all their astrology charts and temples and rituals - everything that their society saw as state of the art and cutting edge technology and wisdom.  
    Left it all and bowed in a little house before a baby.  
        There are no halos.  
        There is no singular evidence of glory.  
        But these wise guys worship.  
    These people who thought they were wise, but in fact were fools, became the people whom God sought and whom He invited as the first guests at the historical unveiling of His Son.

And so the Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled:  
    *"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising,"* (Is 60:3)  
    *"May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him."* (Ps 72:11)

The truly wise men present their gifts to the One who is Himself the greatest gift of all,  
    God's gift to the human race.

Compare that to Herod. Some historians have referred to him as the "Jewish Nero" because of his jealousy for power and an uncontrollable suspicion of everyone, which led to his bathing his own house and kingdom in blood. There was a saying - "It is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." He had his own wife and her 2 brothers killed because he suspected them of treason. Herod was married at least 9 times in order to fulfill his lusts and strengthen his political ties.  
    The bible also tells us in other references that Herod was not a Jew. He was an Edomite - throughout salvation history Edom is a tool in the hands of the devil; a tool with blood lust for God's people, seeking to destroy them.

Herod is the devil's tool, seeking to destroy God's gift of salvation.  
Herod is the rebel against God's rule.

There are not many Herod's. But they are powerful. They are determined. And they can cause much grief.  
Ask any Sudanese Christian.  
    Herod is the symbol of those social, political and economic forces and people who become tools in the hands of the Evil One.  
    They are the forces that overtly seek to suppress or destroy the faith.  
    They seek to push Christianity to the margins.  
    They seek to bully believers into silence.  
    They are antagonistic.

And they cannot be defeated on our own.  
Herod could not.  
Herod-like forces today cannot be defeated by human power alone.  
Divine intervention is required.

As the Magi are guided in a dream, and the work of evil is diverted, so the people of God today need the guiding Hand of the Lord to protect and direct them.

Herod-forces:

They are the social standards of behaviour, the palaces of entertainment, the challenges of our wealthy standards of living, the tugs of temptation that will seek to destroy the faith of Gillian and Joey and seek to destroy their family bonds.

They are the forces that will work hard to undermine the ministry efforts of our new youth pastor, Ron Hosmar, and the rest of the team that works to raise children, youth and young adults in the way of the Saviour of Bethlehem.

No amount of organizing will be able to stop them.

No amount of sheltering will keep them out.

No amount of activity will keep them ignored.

Only divine intervention.

Pray for these children.

Pray for our youth and Calvin's youth ministry!

Pray at home.

Pray here - we've got a beautiful prayer room, a little chapel set up here on the main floor. I want to encourage you to use it. Use it on Sundays after service. Drop by during the week, and take time to use it. Come in and pray when you're picking up your children from a program, or when you're here to attend a meeting.

Pray for God's protection.

Pray for a mighty move and flow of God's Spirit to direct and empower our youth that there would be no spiritual slaughter by the Herod's of our day!

The Magi.

Herod.

And then the ones who unnerve me the most, perhaps because I see myself and Canadian Christianity a little too much in them -

The chief priests and teachers of the law.

They get word that the King of the Jews has been born and they're not the least bit interested.

They didn't care about the star.

They couldn't be bothered to hike the 10km to Bethlehem to see if the prophecy, which had been at the centre of Israel's existence for centuries, was truly fulfilled.

They couldn't be bothered.

They seemed to have it all, all the right stuff -

- all the right biblical and doctrinal knowledge;

They knew the answer to the question posed by the Magi; knew their bible, knew their catechism.

- all the right religious behaviour

They knew when to show up at church, and what words to say when.

- beautiful temple as their spiritual home

They seemed to have it all.

Yet, in reality, they had nothing.

They had been in the faith so long that the shine wore off.

Their faith became dull.

Their spiritual flame was, at best, a dull glowing coal.

Their enthusiasm for the Lord was merely a half-hearted nod.

And they missed out on Jesus.

Someone said to me this past week, "It's hard to get excited when you've been a believer so long. You've heard it all. You've seen it all. And you begin to think, 'Yeah, so?'. You start to take it for granted."

She was right. It **IS** easy to become jaded in our faith.

And distracted -

Let's face it, something new is always a little more interesting than something that's been around for a long time. That's sometimes where people get into trouble with affairs at the office. The new and the shiny. These prophecies were old stuff.

Or there's the squeaky wheel thing; the events of life that are in our face, demanding attention.

Being a religious leader - well, there's always something urgent to do. Who knows? It may well have been that they looked at their palm pilots, realized they had a packed calendar the way it was, and just decided to stay away. No time to go to Bethlehem. Let someone else do it for them.

I wonder how many of us have missed a special blessing because we chose to stay away;  
to not get involved in a small group or bible study  
to not bother attending worship when invited to do so  
to not make the effort to get involved when called to lend a hand or make a contribution.

I know that in 2003 we're busy - sometimes terribly busy.

But do we sometimes let that busyness get the better of us and end up left cold on the sidelines, with the blessing of God passing us by?

Matthew 2 presents us with the magi - truly wise men.

Went out of their way to find and worship the Saviour.

And then, at the end of it all, go home by a different road.

Which I take to be more than just a historical description.

I see a symbol in their of their lives having been turned around.

Their lives began to take a different road.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke the words of God:

"and you will seek me, and you will find me, if you search for me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29)

It is a true promise echoed in Deuteronomy 4:29

"From there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul."

The magi didn't go for a leisurely camel ride or stroll, and casually *wander* into Jerusalem.

They came - intent and determined - deliberate in their faith-driven efforts of seeking Him.

They had made up their minds to do it, and nothing would stop them.

Friends, I want you to understand that God loves you deeply;

so deeply we'll never fully understand it.

And He calls us to Jesus. To meet Him. To have him point a different road home for us.

Are you searching to know Him - more, and better?

Author Max Lucado said,

"If there are a thousand steps between us and God, he will take all but one. He will leave the final one for us. The choice is ours."

Whether you are struggling with the claims of Christianity or sorting out the new chapter that God is moving you toward in your life, I urge you to take that step in God's direction.

2003 is here.

What is the new road that you need to travel; the different road home in your life?

We all have one.

Not one of us can say that we've arrived.

I asked this in a different context just before Christmas.

Let me ask it again.

If you had to point out, to name or label just one area in your life where you know the Lord would call you to grow in, to deepen in, to become more obedient in, to repent in;

what is that area?

We don't have gold, incense or myrrh.

We **DO** have our lives.

I invite you to make a concrete gift to Jesus this morning.

I want you to take the next moment in quiet -

- Please gaze up at the cross here behind me. Don't look at anyone else. Just the cross. And then close your eyes.

As you see the cross, you see the symbol of God's gift to you -

Jesus, His whole life a divine gift for your soul, for your eternity.

What are you prepared to give Him in 2003?

What concrete step, what deliberate sacrifice are you prepared to make?

Will it be increasing your prayer life?

Will it be taking time for spiritual retreats?

Will it be to make deliberate efforts to witness?

Will it be carving time out to work towards social healing in His name?

Will it be increased financial stewardship and giving?

Join the magi. Be wise. Give the Saviour your new year.